

The Day The Sun Came Out

by Dorothy M. Johnson

Connect to Your Life

What do you know about the problems the pioneers faced as they traveled West? With a partner, list the hardships that made the journey so challenging.

Key to the Story

In **historical fiction**, the setting often influences the plot in some way. This story of the Old West takes place during the mid-1800s in the Rocky Mountains. At that time, 350,000 pioneers traveled west in search of a better life. One in 15 died along the way. The story is told from an 11-year-old boy's point of view. His mother has died. Now the rest of the family is going west.

Vocabulary Preview

Words to Know

desperate	savoring
grudging	sedately
endured	

FOCUS

Meet the characters and learn about their journey west.

We left the home place behind, mile by slow mile. We were heading for the mountains, across the prairie where the wind blew forever.

At first there were four of us with the one-horse wagon and its skimpy load. Pa and I walked because I was a big boy of eleven. My two little sisters walked until they got tired. Then they had to be boosted up in the wagon bed.

That was no covered Conestoga, like Pa's folks
10 came West in. It was just an old farm wagon, drawn by one tired horse. It creaked and rumbled westward to the mountains, toward the little woods town where Pa thought he had an old uncle who owned a little two-bit sawmill.

Two weeks we had been moving when we picked up Mary. She had run away from somewhere that she wouldn't tell. Pa didn't want her along. But she stood up to him with no fear in her voice.

"I'd rather go with a family and look
20 after kids," she said, "but I ain't going back. If you won't take me, I'll travel with any wagon that will."

REREAD

Read Mary's words aloud, letting your voice show her feelings.

Pa scowled at her, and wide blue eyes stared back.

"How old are you?" he demanded.

"Twenty," she said. "There's teamsters come this way sometimes. I'd rather go with you folks. But I won't go back."

teamsters

(tēm' stərz)
people who work with teams of horses to haul loads

"We're prid'near out of food," my father
30 told her. "We're clean out of money. I got all I can handle without taking anybody

else.” He turned away as if he hated the sight of her.
“You’ll have to walk,” he said.

So she went along with us. She looked after the little girls, but Pa wouldn’t talk to her.

THINK IT THROUGH

What reasons does Pa give for not wanting Mary to join them?

FOCUS

What problems does the family face?

On the prairie, the wind blew. But in the mountains, there was rain. When we stopped at little timber claims along the way, the homesteaders said it had rained all summer. Crops among the blackened
40 stumps were rotted and spoiled. There was no cheer anywhere. The people we talked to were past worrying. They were scared and desperate.

So was Pa. He traveled twice as far each day as the wagon. He ranged through the woods with his rifle. But he never saw game. He had been depending on killing a deer. But we never got any deer meat except as a grudging gift from the
50 homesteaders.

desperate

(dēs’ pər ȳt)
adj. suffering from extreme need

grudging

(grŭj’ ȳng)
adj. unwilling

He brought in a porcupine once. And that was fat meat and good. Mary roasted it in chunks over the fire, half crying with the smoke. Pa and I rigged up the tarp sheet for a shelter to keep the rain from putting the fire clean out.

The porcupine was long gone, except for some of the dried-out fat that Mary had saved, when we came

to an old, empty cabin. Pa said we'd
have to stop. The horse was wore
60 out. It couldn't pull any more up
those hills in the mountains.

At the cabin, at least there was a
place to stay. We had a few potatoes
left and some cornmeal. There was
a creek that probably had fish in it,
if a person could catch them. Pa tried it for half a day
before he gave up. To this day I don't care for fishing.
I remember my father's sunken eyes in his sad face.

He took Mary and me outside the cabin to talk.
70 Rain dripped on us from branches overhead.

"I think I know where we are," he said. "I figure to
get to old John's and back in about four days. There'll
be food in the town. They'll let me have some
whether old John's still there or not."

He looked at me. "You do like she tells you," he
warned. It was the first time he had admitted Mary
was on earth since we picked her up two weeks before.

"You're my pardner," he said to me, "but it might
be she's got more brains. You mind what she says."

80 He burst out with bitterness. "There
ain't anything good left in the world. Or
people to care if you live or die. But I'll get
food in the town and come back with it."

REREAD

What do Pa's
words tell about
him?

He took a deep breath and added, "If
you get too all-fired hungry, butcher the horse. It'll be
better than starvin'."

He kissed the little girls goodbye. Then he plodded
off through the woods with one blanket and the rifle.

THINK IT THROUGH

What is the family's worst problem? What is Pa's plan to solve it?

FOCUS

Read to find out what Mary and the children do while Pa is away.

The cabin was moldy and had no floor.

90 We kept a fire going under a hole in the roof, so it was full of blinding smoke, but we had to keep the fire so as to dry out the wood.

The third night, we lost the horse. A bear scared him. We heard the racket. Mary and I ran out. But we couldn't see anything in the pitch-dark.

In gray daylight I went looking for him.

I must have walked fifteen miles. It seemed like I had to have that horse at the cabin when Pa came or he'd whip me.

REREAD

Why is the loss of the horse so important?

100 I got plumb lost two or three times. I thought maybe I was going to die there alone and nobody would ever know it. But I found the way back to the clearing.

That was the fourth day. And Pa didn't come. That was the day we ate up the last of the grub.

The fifth day, Mary went looking for the horse. My sisters cried. They huddled in a blanket by the fire, because they were scared and hungry.

I never did get dried out, always having to bring in
110 more damp wood and going out to yell to see if Mary would hear me and not get lost. But I couldn't cry like the little girls did, because I was a big boy, eleven years old.

It was near dark when there was an answer to my yelling. Mary came into the clearing.

Mary didn't have the horse. We never saw hide nor hair of that old horse again. But she was carrying something big and white that looked like a pumpkin with no color to it.

120 She didn't say anything, just looked around and saw Pa wasn't there yet, at the end of the fifth day.

"What's that thing?" my sister Elizabeth demanded.

"Mushroom," Mary answered. "I bet it hefts ten pounds."

"What are you going to do with it now?" I said. "Play football here?"

"Eat it—maybe," she said, putting it in a corner. Her wet hair hung over her
130 shoulders. She huddled by the fire.

THINK IT THROUGH

The family's situation has changed. How has it gotten worse?

FOCUS

Discover why the narrator begins to hate Mary.

My sister Sarah began to cry again. "I'm hungry!" she kept saying.

"Mushrooms ain't good eating," I said. "They can kill you."

"Maybe," Mary answered. "Maybe they can. I don't set up to know all about everything, like some people."

"What's that mark on your shoulder?" I asked her. "You tore your dress on the brush."

140 "What do you think it is?" she said. Her head was bowed in the smoke.

"Looks like scars," I guessed.

"'Tis scars. They whipped me, them I used to live with. Now mind your own business. I want to think."

REREAD

What do you learn about Mary's past?

Elizabeth cried, "Why don't Pa come back?"

"He's coming," Mary promised. "Can't come in the dark. Your pa'll take care of you soon's he can."

She got up and looked around in the grub box.

150 "Nothing there but empty dishes," I growled. "If there was anything, we'd know it."

Mary stood up. She was holding the can with the porcupine grease.

"I'm going to have something to eat," she said coolly. "You kids can't have any yet. And I don't want any crying, mind."

It was a cruel thing, what she did then. She sliced that big, solid mushroom and heated grease in a pan.

The smell of it brought the little girls out of their
160 bed. But she told them to go back in so fierce a voice that they obeyed. They cried to break your heart.

I didn't cry. I watched, hating her.

I endured the smell of the mushroom frying as long as I could. Then I said, "Give me some."

endured
(ĕn dŏrd')
v. put up with;
past tense of
endure

"Tomorrow," Mary answered.

"Tomorrow, maybe. But not tonight." She turned to me with a sharp command: "Don't bother me! Just leave me be."

170 She knelt there by the fire and finished frying the slice of mushroom.

If I'd had Pa's rifle, I'd have been willing to kill her right then and there.

She didn't eat right away. She looked at the brown, fried slice for a while and said, "By tomorrow morning, I guess you can tell whether you want any."

REREAD

The girls stared at her as she ate. Sarah was chewing on an old leather glove.

Why do you think Mary won't let the others eat?

180 When Mary crawled into the quilts with them, they moved away as far as they could get.

I was so scared that my stomach heaved, empty as it was.

Mary didn't stay in the quilt long. She took a drink out of the water bucket and sat down by the fire and looked through the smoke at me.

She said in a low voice, "I don't know how it will be if it's poison. Just do the best you can with the girls. Because your pa will come back, you know. . . . You better go to bed. I'm going to sit up."

REREAD

What is Mary waiting for?

And so would you sit up. If it might be your last night on earth and the pain of death might seize you at any moment, you would sit up by the smoky fire, wide-awake, remembering whatever you had to remember, savoring life.

savoring

(sā' vər ɪŋg)

adj. enjoying and appreciating fully

We sat in silence after the girls had gone to sleep. Once I asked, "How long does it take?"

200 "I never heard," she answered. "Don't think about it."

I slept after a while, with my chin on my chest.

THINK IT THROUGH

What do Mary's actions show about her?

FOCUS

A new day is beginning. Read to find out what happens to Mary.

Mary's moving around brought me wide-awake.
The black of night was fading.

"I guess it's all right," Mary said. "I'd be able to tell by now, wouldn't I?"

I answered gruffly, "I don't know."

Mary stood in the doorway for a while, looking out at the dripping world as if she found it beautiful.

210 Then she fried slices of the mushroom while the little girls danced with anxiety.

We feasted, we three, my sisters and I, until Mary ruled, "That'll hold you," and would not cook any more. She didn't touch any of the mushroom herself.

That was a strange day in the moldy cabin. Mary laughed and was gay. She told stories. And we played "Who's Got the Thimble?" with a pine cone.

In the afternoon we heard a shout. My sisters screamed and I ran ahead of them across the clearing.

220 The rain had stopped. My father came plunging out of the woods leading a pack horse—and well I remember the treasures of food in that pack.

He glanced at us anxiously as he tore the ropes that bound the pack.

"Where's the other one?" he demanded.

Mary came out of the cabin then, walking sedately. As she came toward us, the sun began to shine.

sedately
(sĕd'āt' lē)
adv. in a slow, dignified way

My stepmother was a wonderful woman.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. What does the last line of the story tell you?
2. What can you infer, or figure out, about Mary's character? What clues tell you this?
3. In what ways does Mary show the toughness necessary for pioneer life?